

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

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Body

CONTENT: MCGUFFIN, FREEMAN, HIXSON, ROSS, MEYERS, COURTRIGHT

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

There's a lot that happens on the Oregon coast. And it's a wonderfully spectacular setting. It's also rugged and it's dangerous.

GRAPHICS: MAP OF OREGON COAST

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Coquille is right by the beach. It's about 15, 20 miles from the Pacific Ocean, a couple hours north of the California border.

SHERRY HIXSON (NICK'S FORMER TEACHER)

Coquille is a small farming community, logging, mill-working kind of a, a town.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

Coquille is a two stoplight town. It's kind of tucked into the forest. There's a few restaurants and shops, but there's nothing particularly charming about it.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

This is a really, really small, close community. Everybody knows everyone.

VIDEO CLIP: 2000 PRESS CONFERENCE FOOTAGE

COQUILLE SPOKESPERSON (MALE)

The body of a teenage female tentatively identified as Leah Freeman was discovered.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

What really split this very tight-knit community apart was a tragic criminal case. It involved two high school sweethearts, Leah Freeman and Nick McGuffin.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

PRODUCER (MALE)

Why do they think you did it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Because they have nothing else to go on and I'm the boyfriend.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) It was the signature event that happened in Coquille. It was the event that brought people together and split them apart.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

Nick McGuffin would become one of the town's most notorious figures.

REPORTER (FEMALE)

Nick McGuffin.

REPORTER (FEMALE) (CONTINUED)

Nick McGuffin.

REPORTER (MALE)

McGuffin.

REPORTER (FEMALE)

Killing his girlfriend.

REPORTER (MALE)

Murder.

REPORTER (MALE) (CONTINUED)

Nicholas McGuffin, guilty of manslaughter.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

He became infamous.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

My name's Nick McGuffin. I'm from Coquille, Oregon. The reason why we're sitting here for me in my eyes is to bring awareness to this case. I'm doing this not for myself, but I'm doing this for Leah and her

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family to get resolution. I'm an innocent man and I want the false narrative to go away. I think I was about two, three when we moved down to Coquille. My mom works in the medical field and my dad, he started a business, a produce market. I'd ride my mountain bike delivering the newspaper with the old paper bag on it and I wasn't the biggest - kid.

SHERRY HIXSON (NICK'S FORMER TEACHER)

I was Nick's fourth grade teacher in, I believe it was 1992. He was a great student. He enjoyed learning. He was creative.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

In high school, I was just kind of like any average student. I wasn't different really than anybody else.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Nick played for the Coquille football team and it was a big thing there in Coquille, Friday night football, just like it is in most small towns.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

Nick the high school kid, he was always in love in a way, you know? He always had a girl. The girls liked him.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I had met Leah when I was walking through the gym and she was in volleyball practice. She was a freshman and I was a senior. And she sees me looking at her and she kind of gives me this look. Leah was beautiful. That was my first impression. She was just a, a short, bright personality. And Leah was like a sparkle. She had a glow to her and it was somebody that I wanted to get to know.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

They spent some time together and started dating. I know that Leah really cared about him a great deal. I think that when you're young, you develop strong feelings really quickly, especially if it's with an older guy who shows a lot of interest in you.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

My Mustang was not anything special. It had a little straight six in it. It was a little three-speed transmission. A lot of times, Leah and I would just drive around and listen to music. I remember a certain song that her and I always listened to. It was Macy Gray, "I Try," came out in '99. We had a lot of deep conversations. We had a future planned. I know we loved each other. I loved her without a doubt.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

I think that there were times when Leah would get jealous of Nick hanging out with other girls or that sort of thing. They would argue about it. But they always seemed to resolve it and stay together.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

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CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

He was definitely a flirt. He was kind of into every girl but he did seem like he really cared about her.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I asked Leah if she'd go to prom with me. She had a, a gorgeous white dress. She had her hair done perfectly. I'm glad we went and got, we got the pictures that we did together. I think Leah makes me look better.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

He seemed like an okay kind of guy. But still, the age difference was there. And then I found out that they were being sexually active and that was disturbing. It caused some conflict between Leah and I, because she wanted to see him. She wanted him to be her boyfriend and I didn't.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

Together, they were very compatible. Like any young couple, they had their issues, arguing, whatever, but they both wanted to be together.

GRAPHICS: 2000 JUNE 28

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

June 28th, 2000. I'll never forget that date. It started out like any normal day. I got in my Mustang and went to her house. I remember her telling me, we need to, you know, clean the outside of the car. We were spraying each other with the hose, splashing each other with soap. I remember we were having a good time. Decision was made to take her to Cherie's house at 7:00 and pick her up at 9:00.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

I hadn't seen her for a while. We were still really good friends, but we just didn't hang out as much because she was with Nick a lot.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

She was at Cherie's and she wanted to go jogging and asked Cherie to go with her. Cherie asked her mom and her mom said no, "Because every time you do, Nick comes and picks Leah up and you end up walking home alone." So, Leah heard that and I guess she got mad and started to walk off.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

So, she left and then I followed her out to the road and that's when, you know, I told her, "It's not about you." I guess a lot of it was about the guy she was with. You know, he was, like, trying to take her away to do things that I wasn't really welcome. She was mad. She had her arms folded and I can actually still picture it. That was, when she was mad, you knew she was mad.

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LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Leah took off upset, clearly upset and they last, she was headed toward the high school. Spotted by numerous witnesses along the way.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

You don't think anything like that's gonna happen in a small town. Definitely nothing sinister, you would ever think would happen in Coquille.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

On June 28th, Leah is at her friend Cherie's house visiting. The two get into an argument and Leah storms out of the home. And that's shortly before 9:00 pm.

GRAPHICS: 2000 JUNE 28

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) When I first interviewed Cherie back in 2010, she told me that Leah was very upset when she left her house that night.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

Oh, she was pissed. I remember her saying to me, "I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you."

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

And it was, I, apparently, it was just shortly before 9:00. Like five to 9:00, I guess.

GRAPHICS: MAP OF COQUILLE AREA

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

This is an, an overview of the area that we're talking about, Coquille, Oregon. We know from Cherie, Leah leaves on foot.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

She walked down Fourth Street and turned left on Central Boulevard. She was seen walking by McKay's Market.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

We have witnesses that put her at the Fast Mart.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

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Then, we have a sighting of her at a, a restaurant that's a little farther up.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

The next sighting we have is Leah up here by the high school.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

The people that saw her said she had her arms crossed and looked angry.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) So, she was probably angry about the argument she just had...

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Right.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) ...at the house.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Right.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

The next witness says that around 9:30 pm, she sees Leah standing outside a pay phone. And there are two men arguing nearby. Next time we see Leah, she's standing outside the gas station and that's the last time that anyone sees Leah. Several minutes later, a witness hears a high-pitched scream.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) And nobody saw anything suspicious? Stranger pick her up or a stranger driving around town?

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Not, not to my knowledge.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It was 9:00. I went to go over to Cherie's to go get Leah. I asked her where Leah was.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

I said, "We got in a fight, she left. She's probably walking home. You know, I'm sure that if you just drive to her house, you'll find her."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

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It's not a very big town. You can walk through from Cherie's to the high school in a matter of minutes.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

So, Nick gets back into his car and starts driving through the town of Coquille, looking for Leah.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I drive to Fast Mart. I had asked multiple people if they'd seen Leah walk by.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

And about 9:00 at night, I see Nick pull up and he says, "is Leah here?" And I said, "No."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Nobody had seen her. I remember going by the high school.

HALEY GREENWAY (NICK'S FRIEND)

I had a very strict curfew of 10:00. As I was driving back home, I came to the stop sign by the high school and I saw Nick driving by in his Mustang.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

So I drove by Leah's house, because I didn't see her.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

He did call the house shortly after 10:00 that night and he said, "Is Leah there?" And I said, "Leah? No, isn't she with you?" And goes, "Well," he goes, "It's alright. Don't worry. I'm gonna go find her and I'll bring her home."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I went back to Fast Mart probably five or six times.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

He had looked every place that he could think of and couldn't find her.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I mean, I had even talked to police twice that night. My headlight was out and I got pulled over for it both times. I told them that I, you know, was looking for my girlfriend and he told me to get it fixed.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

After getting pulled over two different times by police, Nick decides to go to his friend Kristen and ask her to drive around with him to look for Leah.

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JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

And Kristen drives around with Nick for an hour.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I dropped Kristen off around 2:00 probably. I decided to go by Leah's house one more time. And I saw a glare on her, on her window, thought it was her TV. Back then, it was 2000. It's not like I, she could send me a text. She couldn't call me on a cell phone. So, I thought she was home and I went home after that.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

And I looked in her room and her bed was empty.

GRAPHICS: 2000 JUNE 29

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Leah's mom, Cory, calls at like 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning the next day.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I said, "Where's Leah? She's not here." He goes, "She didn't come home last night?" And I said, "No. Where is she?" He goes, "I don't know."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I went into town as, as quick as I could. I talked to Cory. We went down to the police department and we filed a missing person's report. The police basically told us that - Leah was probably a runaway.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I knew. I knew something was wrong. This girl had no reason to run away. She had absolutely no reason. None.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I handed out fliers with, with people everywhere. Every town. "Have you seen Leah?"

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Nobody, nobody seemed to know anything.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

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I don't remember what date it was the police called me. They wanted to talk to me. So, of course I'm gonna go in and I'm gonna help them.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Today is June 30th. It is 13:48 hours. This is a statement of Nick McGuffin, a missing person case involving Leah Freeman.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Nicholas James McGuffin.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

People tend to think, if I'm innocent, I don't have anything to hide. The problem is, even though you think what you're saying is, is fine and it's gonna be helpful, it can be turned back on you in a second.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

How would you characterize her personal life?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When she's around me, I don't know, she just seems really bright and happy-go-lucky and giggly. She's just a really good person.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I started to have my concerns when they, kind of, started, I guess, trying to twist my words with the way I speak.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Did she ever have problems at home?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Her parents are divorced and her depression maybe has a lot to do with her childhood and...

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Her depression?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Huh?

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

What depression? I didn't know. You were just telling me she was happy-go-lucky and...

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

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She is, she is.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

In the first week, they actually wanted to look at my Mustang. I signed it over to them immediately. I did not have anything to hide. There was nothing that I was worried about.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

The night that Leah disappeared, it's about 11:40. The mechanic worked the swing shift. He's driving home and he saw a shoe lying in the road. He thought maybe one of these kids had left a shoe out there and so, he, he picked it up, took it home.

GRAPHICS: NEWS HEADLINE: COQUILLE FAMILY, POLICE SEARCH FOR 15-YEAR-OLD

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

And then when it came out in public that we were looking for Leah, that person came forward with the shoe. We showed it to Leah's sister. She said, "I think that's her shoe."

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Then on the Fourth of July, just six days after Leah went missing, her other shoe is discovered and it's got blood on it.

GRAPHICS: MAP OF COQUILLE AREA

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

This point here is where her right shoe is found on North Elm Street. Leah's bloodstained left shoe is found on Hudson Ridge. The distance from where the left shoe is found on Hudson Ridge back to the town of Coquille is about a 10-mile stretch.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

When it first, the case first started, Cory felt she wasn't being taken seriously by the police department. When we had that second shoe with her blood on it, I think everybody felt that this was not gonna end well.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I don't know if the second shoe gave me more questions, or if it solidified the horror that we were about to find out.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

At first they just didn't take it seriously.

GRAPHICS: NEWS HEADLINE: COQUILLE GIRL STILL MISSING

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CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

They just looked at her as a runaway. I don't think they were actively looking for her.

GRAPHICS: MISSING POSTER

GRAPHICS: NEWS CLIPPINGS

MELISSA BEEBE (LEAH'S COUSIN)

We just told them and told them that she would not ever run away, that something has happened to her. They just didn't listen to the family at all.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

Then they started to take it seriously once they found that shoe. Okay, wait, something happened.

GRAPHICS: 2000 AUGUST 3

GRAPHICS: LEAH MISSING 5 WEEKS

VIDEO CLIP: PRESS CONFERENCE FOOTAGE

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

At approximately 3:30 this afternoon, the body of a teenage female, tentatively identified as Leah Freeman, was discovered in the Fairview area in Coos County.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

The area where Leah disappeared from is right in here. Then we've got way over here, about eight miles away, we've got where Leah's body is found on Lee Valley Road. And this eight-mile stretch, that's through backwoods, gravelly, old logging roads up Fairview Mountain.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHRIS WEBLEY (COQUILLE POLICE DEPT)

Behind me here is the area where the remains of Leah Freeman was found. Just right down at the base of this hill where evidently our suspects had disposed of Leah's body. There was a search party assigned to this area. They detected the odor that was consistent with a decomposing human body and they found Leah's remains. The body was in bad, bad condition. She was out in the summer heat six weeks. It's not that hot around here, but on the other hand, it's summertime and the, the decomposition, there was animals. So, there's a lot of information that would've been there earlier, that just wasn't available to anybody, unfortunately.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

It was August 3rd. I'd gone out to Laverne Park with my friend Janet, letting her grandson play and all of a sudden, a Coquille city cop pulled into Laverne Park. He said, "Cory, I need to take you home." I said, "They found her?" He told me he didn't know.

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JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) But you knew.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Yeah. Yeah, I knew, but I still let the denial take over. I wanted to go back in time. I didn't want, I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to hear the final news. I didn't want to hear it.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I remember the exact moment. I mean, I broke down. After being told that, I don't remember anything after that. I just remember that specific moment in time. That's the saddest moment that I've ever gone through and that I can imagine going through.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

It was pretty much just, like, you know, losing, like, literally, like, losing a piece of yourself. I mean, I know people say that, but that's really how it feels. And I guess I just, like, the fight that I had with her, I just wish, of course, that it had never happened.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) But you realize that you have no guilt in this, right? I mean, you, arguments happen.

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

No, I know. But usually you get a chance to say you're sorry.

GRAPHICS: NEWS HEADLINES

REPORTER (FEMALE)

15-year-old Leah Freeman vanished off the streets of Coquille five weeks ago. Her death is being treated as a homicide, but investigators are saying little else.

VIDEO CLIP: PRESS CONFERENCE FOOTAGE

REPORTER (FEMALE)

How close are we to making an arrest?

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I can't answer that.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

I think that everybody was quick to point fingers at Nick, because he's the most likely person, being her boyfriend.

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SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

They went so hard after Nick because he was the only option they felt they had.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

And then it started getting into harassment. I was hospitalized for an anxiety attack. I mean, I was overloaded with stress and lack of sleep.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Police just aren't able to make any kind of a case stick against Nick McGuffin or anybody else for that matter and over time, there just isn't a single arrest made.

GRAPHICS: NEWS HEADLINES

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

We were kind of at a standstill at that point and as time went by, it slowly became a cold case.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Law enforcement tapered off. Public perception and opinion and harassment didn't.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

The talk around here is about him and that he did it.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

The worst thing about a rumor mill is that it can start with one person saying something and by the time it's even gotten to one more person, it's just completely changed. It, that is one of the worst things about living in a small town.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CHERIE MITCHELL (LEAH'S FRIEND)

I remember him telling me one time that he can't even walk into town without somebody calling him a murderer.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

One of the times that we were at the store with him, somebody came up to us and started yelling at him and calling him a murderer. The whole store heard it.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

There was a suicide attempt. It was kind of a culmination. It's like when a tea kettle boils and it starts to make that hum. You just get an overload. You don't know what else to do.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

About a year after Leah's murder, Nick met other woman and he began to crawl out of his dark depression.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I think meeting her was the right thing at that moment. She helped me through a lot of it and I think I needed that to help me through what I was going through. And it's 2007. My daughter was born. At that moment you know you need to get things right to be a father.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

Nick and his daughter's mother got very serious and he decided to go to culinary school. Nick found his calling. He's an awesome chef.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When people eat your food and they like it, I get the enjoyment out of that. I graduated top of my class. Got a job at the casino. I was promoted to Head Banquet Chef and that was probably the best job I, I had had. Things were kind of starting to look up.

GRAPHICS: 2010 JANUARY 25

GRAPHICS: NEWS HEADLINE: HUNTING A KILLER

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

So the case goes cold, as cold cases will and onto the scene comes a new police chief and he makes it his job, he's going to find the killer. And Nick, I think, has thought, "Okay, this is finally over. They're gonna let me live in peace."

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Now with the reopening of this case, police find possible new evidence and possible new suspects.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

Good evening and thank you all for coming.

VIDEO CLIP: LOCAL NEWS FOOTAGE

GIA VANG (KEZI NEWS)

Well, nearly a decade has gone by since Leah Freeman disappeared and was later found dead.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

It's 2008 and by now it's been eight long years since the body of 15-year-old Leah Freeman was found near an old logging road outside of the town of Coquille, Oregon.

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CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

If anyone has a memory to share, please come up and do so.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

It was a fog that kind of hung over the town for this entire time.

MELISSA BEEBE (LEAH'S COUSIN)

And this is all gonna get better. We're gonna get justice for Leah.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

The community really wanted to know what happened. They wanted justice. They wanted answers. Especially the victim's mom, Cory Courtright.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

I want justice. I want for whoever killed her to pay for it, because they've been walking free for years and it's just wrong.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I said, we need to re-open this case. We need to solve is. And, and I said, I don't care where this leads. We need to find the truth.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

So, Coquille is looking for a new police chief. And one of those candidates comes from a desert town in Arizona, 1,400 miles away.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

This blood in the trunk has become a reality game for us.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

There's a new sheriff in town.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

When I arrived in Coquille, one of the things that people kept addressing, whether I was talking to our law enforcement, sitting in a restaurant, getting a soda, everybody was talking about the Leah Freeman case. And one of the expectations as a new police chief was, "What are you gonna do about it, Chief?" And I'll of course, copy you, too, so you're in the loop with that.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

I think our community is so fortunate to have him.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

(Inaudible) concern.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

A little bit.

CORY COURTRIGHT (LEAH'S MOTHER)

He seems to just have his heart completely in this case and I hope that he might be the reason we get our justice.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

If we haven't ruled him out, then why aren't we?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When they reopened the investigation, I looked at it as that they were gonna look at this case properly. I had hopes that they were, you know, going to, to solve it properly.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We all refreshed on the case file. We looked at every person that was identified as a possible suspect in this case and then we went forward.

VIDEO CLIP: PRESS CONFERENCE FOOTAGE

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Good morning, everyone.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Chief Dannels was very accessible. He held press conferences.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We've had 35 law enforcement officers working this case since January of 2010 and we've worked steady.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

He knew the importance of the media's involvement.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) "20/20" had heard that there was a new police chief in town and that he was anxious to solve the case.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

(Off-camera) In fact, he was willing to let us follow the investigation from the inside.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

"20/20" will be present and they'll be in with us.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Do you know exactly, Chief, where it was? Was it right by the - telephone or in the street or where was it?

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Right here on the street area. So, whatever happened it was, obviously, taken off her shoe by, by, involuntarily.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) The police chief told us he was looking into every possible theory, including one that was on the local rumor mill that there were two men seen at a gas station very close to where Leah was last seen.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

So, the way I understand that rumor is that two, two men were probably drinking, that they had hit her. So, they couldn't very well turn themselves in. And whether they panicked or just don't have a conscience or whatever, they dispose of the body and walk away from it.

VIDEO CLIP: 2010 INTERVIEW FOOTAGE

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) And what about the rumor that's been out there, that she was hit by a car? It was an accident.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Yeah, we've investigated that and I do not believe she died as a result of being hit by a car.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) You believe that it was murder.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Oh, absolutely.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

No matter which way we went, at the end of the day, it came back to Nick McGuffin. When you put it all together, the tally of circumstances, it painted a picture that Nick McGuffin was directly responsible for the death of Leah Freeman.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I didn't see that when the case re-opened that it would come back on me. Yeah, I just, I didn't see that coming.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

This was not a case of DNA that connected Nick to the scene. We didn't have physical evidence. We had a shoe that was found in this vicinity where Leah was last seen, with blood on it, which was her blood.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Investigators also take another look at Nick's Mustang to see if there was any evidence at all that Leah's body had been inside that car.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

When Leah Freeman first went missing, when they did the search warrant on the Mustang several weeks later, the trunk was cleaned.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

There was nothing in there. It had been wiped. It was, just nothing there.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) The police were trying to turn the heat up on Nick.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) So they even followed him to work and parked outside.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

We're gonna stop by Mr. McGuffin's residence and see if he's around.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When they reopened the case...

CHRIS WEBLEY (COQUILLE POLICE DEPT)

Hey Chief, we're sitting on Nick's car over here at the mill.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

...they followed me everywhere I went. That's what they did.

CHRIS WEBLEY (COQUILLE POLICE DEPT)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

It may have reached back to him by now.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We weren't trying to hide from Nick. We wanted to see what he was doing.

OFFICER SANBORN (MALE)

I think it is him.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Who was he talking to? Who was he going to visit? We wanted Nick to know, "Hey, Nick, listen, we're opening this up."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Being followed. Having cameras on you. What it was was an intimidation tactic to try to get me to react. And I was always told to just keep my head held high. And I, and people tell me, "Just wave at them." And so, I did that.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I don't think he was surprised to see us. And that's a, kind of the goal.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We had witnesses, many, many witnesses and we developed more witnesses.

DETECTIVE (MALE)

We'll go and recontact her.

VIDEO CLIP: PRESS CONFERENCE FOOTAGE

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We've interviewed over 100, almost 200 people in the last six months.

DETECTIVE (MALE)

So, did you guys confront her with what Nicky told you?

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

With all these witnesses coming forward, police say they're getting information that appears to contradict what Nick has said all along, that he had not seen Leah after he dropped her off at her girlfriend's house around 7:00.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I basically drove everywhere for that four hours looking for her and I didn't see her once.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We have several witnesses that actually place Nick with Leah after 9:00. If he's claiming he wasn't with her at - after 9:00, but we can show he was with her, what's he hiding?

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

But Police Chief Dannels' key witness would turn out to be somebody who came right out of the blue.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

So, on the night Leah went missing, Nick turned to a friend who offered him help. Fast forward 11 years and she becomes one of his most damning witnesses.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

He just tried to kiss me.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

So, this guy tried to put a move on you?

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

He tried to have sex with me and then I told him he had to stop.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

COQUILLE RESIDENT (FEMALE)

Thank you so much.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Of all these witnesses who came forward to talk to police, one stood out as doing the most damage to Nick and that was his friend, Kristen Steinhoff.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

So, you're in an unfamiliar car, looking for somebody you don't know, correct?

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

I know what she looks like. I've seen her, like, once or twice.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

The night that Leah went missing, Nick claims that he went to see his friend Kristen around midnight.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

She told me, you know, if you can't find her, come over later and I'll help you find her.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Kristen Steinhoff was critical in this case. Think about this. Right after Leah goes missing, that's who he's with. That is critical to where we want to go in this case.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Back in 2000, Kristen gave police information about Nick that seemed greatly contrary to everything he had told police about his relationship with Leah, that he was loving and concerned.

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

We smoked dope and everything else. Crack heads, I don't know, bleakers. We can't really tell the timing.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Wait, what, where did you, can I ask you, where you smoked the meth with him that night?

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

In my bedroom at home. He just tried to kiss me.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Grab a hold of you or...

KRISTEN STEINHOFF (NICK'S FORMER FRIEND)

He tried to have sex with me and then I told him he had to stop.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Kristen was very valuable to this investigation, very valuable to us. Did we ever get a complete or she opened up to us? I don't think we did, but we got enough that brought discredit to what Nick was saying.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. When I got there, you know, one thing led to another. Her and I started kissing. It's not a proud moment. Definitely not a proud moment. But we stopped. Kristen and I never had sex. I didn't do drugs that night that she claimed that I did. I didn't do any meth that night. I did smoke marijuana. I mean, there's no sensational thing like they portrayed. I was an 18-year-old kid.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

It's very damaging because if he loves Leah so much, what is he doing messing around when Leah's missing? It definitely hurt things.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

This is what Nick did. This is the time frame that he does it.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

Even more suspicion turned Nick's way...

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

PRODUCER (MALE)

This really is in sync.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

...when police speculated to ABC that Leah might have been pregnant at the time that she went missing. That could've been a motive to pin on Nick.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

RAY MCNEELY (COQUILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT)

She was 15, he was 18 and if she was pregnant, then he could get in trouble for statutory rape.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

That was one of the investigators that made that comment. You got to remember, we looked at every angle that, humanly possible on this case. Was there a motive? What could the motive be? That was his thought, but it was never proven.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The misstatements that they said on that original "20/20" episode, I have a lot of frustrations with it. No, Leah wasn't pregnant. It wouldn't have mattered if she was. To say that on TV, it's frustrating.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We're not Hollywood, we're real. (Inaudible)

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) What struck me, even during the investigation, was that there was no real physical hard evidence against Nick that he was involved at all. Nick was the number one person we wanted to talk to. We asked and asked, but he refused every time. So, finally I just walked up to him when he was parked on the street.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) I just want to ask you how, how it's been.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Huh?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

About how it's been. That's all I want to ask you about. Has it been difficult?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

How do you, how do you think it's been?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

I don't know. I mean, you know, I know you've been under scrutiny.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It's ironic that's the saying, "Hindsight's 20/20" but I don't think talking to "20/20" back then would have helped. They came there with law enforcement initially.

JEFF SKRZYPEK (KEZI NEWS)

With the tenth anniversary of Leah Freeman's disappearance and death just days away, authorities here in Coquille say they're now closer than ever to bringing justice to this case.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I decided to take it to the grand jury. I called over 110 witnesses. And after presenting all this evidence, they came back and said, "We think Nick did it. We think he ought to be charged."

GRAPHICS: 2010 AUGUST 23

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It was August 23, 2010. It was a normal day at work. I remember I was doing a banquet and I had forgotten a recipe at my house. So, I ran home real quick. Had to go get the recipe.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We had an arrest team in place.

VIDEO CLIP: ":20/20" FOOTAGE

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

You have team five and team three and team eight on the west side...

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Right.

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

...which is past the driveway.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Right.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

The team went out.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Noticed I was being followed as usual.

DISPATCHER (FEMALE)

There is contact with the helicopter.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We already had surveillance on Nick.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I was gonna check the mail.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

The team needs to know that we've got the indictment.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When I pulled up to my mailbox, cars everywhere. Came from everywhere. Camera crews came from everywhere. I don't remember much. I just remember them just up front in my face.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

POLICE OFFICER (MALE)

Separate your feet for me. Separate your feet. Separate your feet.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

They took him down, made the arrest.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

PRODUCER (MALE)

What do you think this is all about?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Well, obviously, they said it's for the murder of Leah Freeman.

PRODUCER (MALE)

Did you do it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

No, I didn't do it. Love of my life, man.

PRODUCER (MALE)

Why do they think you did it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Because they have nothing else to go on and I'm the boyfriend. Alright.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

When I got arrested, it felt like a nightmare that I was trying to wake up from. But I never woke up from it.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

When I talked to Leah's mom and told her that we had arrested Nick for this crime almost a decade later, she cried. She was emotionally upset. I think there was relief. There was some closure.

REPORTER (MALE)

District Attorney Paul Frasier and Coquille's chief of police broke the news to Leah Freeman's mother that police had arrested Nicholas McGuffin for the girl's murder.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

When I saw Nick on TV when he was arrested, it made me sick, because it just wasn't Nick. He, like, everything was drained from him.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Well, I'm not a flight risk and I just, I'm a family man and I work hard.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

And nobody would believe what we were saying.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I mean, I was scared. I was nervous, I was worried. And I, I was facing life in prison. Life in prison for a crime you didn't commit.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

So, finally after 10 years, Nick McGuffin has been charged and there's about to be a trial. At the end of which comes a verdict that will shock everyone in the courtroom.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

But what we don't see coming is this sort of guardian angel who takes up his cause and by the time she's finished, everything you thought you knew about this case is thrown into question.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

COMMERCIAL BREAK

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Has it been difficult?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

How do you, how do you think it's been?

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

I don't know.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Voiceover) We tried to get him to talk then, ten years ago.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Now he's finally ready, after wrongfully spending nearly a decade behind bars.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I want the false narrative to go away. I want the false closure to go away. I want to find out who did this.

MARK DANNELS (FORMER COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Nick McGuffin was directly responsible for the death of Leah Freeman.

STACIE CRUTCHFIELD (LEAH'S FRIEND)

He's the most likely person, being her boyfriend.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

"Well, she's gone, so Nick must have done it." It really feels like a leap. They just guessed. It wasn't a case.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

They create an entire theory to convict a man based on evidence that's just wrong.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

You're screaming, nobody can hear you. Nobody wants to hear you.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

That DNA we know doesn't belong to Nick, but the question still plagues him. Who does it belong to?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

Let's solve this case once and for all.

GRAPHICS: LAST SEEN WALKING

JEAN IVEY GURNEY (OWNER "THE SENTINEL")

It's a trauma to everyone. And it's a tight-knit community. When one of our children goes missing, oh, you know, that is a huge, huge thing. And it wasn't just one of our children in trouble. It was two.

VIDEO CLIP: "20/20" FOOTAGE

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Shortly after the indictment was returned this afternoon, an arrest warrant was issued for Mr. McGuffin.

PRODUCER (MALE)

Did you do it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

No, I didn't do it.

PRODUCER (MALE)

Why do they think you did it?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Because they have nothing else to go on and I'm the boyfriend.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

I think a lot of people, by the time this trial came around, by the time Nick was finally arrested, had made up their minds that he was guilty, that he had done it. And I don't, I don't think that applies to everyone in town, but the whole town certainly knew who he was and everybody seemed to have an opinion one way or another.

CHRIS CUOMO (ABC NEWS)

Tonight, the story of a 15-year-old who wasn't safe. But was her boyfriend to blame?

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

It became a big, sensational media story, and it goes national. "20/20" does a big piece, and all of that really just increases the profile, increases the pressure to get a, to get a conviction.

JIM AVILA (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) When the piece aired, people may very well have formed an opinion on Nick's innocence or guilt. After all, the police were adamant about telling their side of the story and Nick was not.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

We were concerned that people would have strong opinions one way or the other, and there was a question about whether Nick could get a fair trial.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) In a town this small with a crime this high-profile, you're not gonna get a jury of people who know nothing about the case, but that's not the standard. The standard is finding a jury of 12 people who can put aside anything that they know and be able to objectively evaluate the evidence presented in court.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

We followed that up with a survey to be able to determine whether prospective jurors would be able to be fair, and the result was people could be fair.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I lost over 20 pounds when I was in county awaiting my trial. At every step in my case, I have been offered deals by the DA. Take a lesser charge. I told them no. Innocent people don't take plea deals. I'll never accept one.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

On July 7, 2011, 11 years after Leah was killed, a murder trial is finally underway.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I argued what happened was they got into an argument, it got physical, and it went bad from there.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Nick stated he last saw Leah when he dropped her off at her best friend's house.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I was with her until 7:00 that night, and I dropped her off at Cherie Mitchell's and she told me to come back at 9:00.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

We know, based on an interview statement we have now that that's not true.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

The state had three pieces of evidence that they say show that Nick and Leah fought that night and that he killed her. The first witness, John Lindegren.

PROSECUTOR (FEMALE)

The evidence will show, from John Lindegren, the defendant actually caught up with Leah Freeman after she left Cherie Ann Mitchell's house. Was seen in an argument outside on Elm Street, near Cherie Ann Mitchell's house, sometime after 9:00.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Did you see Leah Freeman that night?

JOHN LINDEGREN (WITNESS)

I did, sir.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

See Nicholas McGuffin that night?

JOHN LINDEGREN (WITNESS)

Yes, I did, sir.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

See them together?

JOHN LINDEGREN (WITNESS)

I did.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

This timing was important because it coincided pretty close to what Cherie Mitchell was saying in terms of Leah leaving and Nick coming to pick her up, supposedly. It put a hole in Nick's story, is what it did.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

The second piece of evidence the state presented at trial, the shoe that was found near the graveyard across from the high school where Leah was last seen.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Right here on the street area there's a shoe. So the shoe was tested, sent to the lab and Leah's DNA and her blood was on that shoe. And based on the fact there's blood on the shoe, it's a, a reasonable person would believe there was a violent act of some sort.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

The state's case against Nick is that he was very, very upset that Leah was going to break up with him.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

He finds her by the high school. He tries to get her into the car. She loses a shoe. She ends up with a bloody lip or a bloody nose. She screams, and in an effort to keep her quiet, or in anger, he strangles her. Then she's transported to where she's found off of Lee Valley Road five weeks later.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

But the most powerful piece of evidence the state presented is an alleged confession, a statement a witness said Nick made in 2002, two years after Leah's murder.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

The prosecution's witness, David Breakfield, claimed that Nick had made an angry statement.

PROSECUTOR (FEMALE)

Mr. Breakfield, was there a confrontation with the defendant?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

Several.

PROSECUTOR (FEMALE)

And what, if anything, did the defendant tell you?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

That, "I strangled that bitch and I'll strangle you, too."

PROSECUTOR (FEMALE)

Did he say anything else to you?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

"I've killed before and I'll kill again."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

David Breakfield was never one of my friends. He had dated my daughter's mother for a little bit. I know I never said anything like that.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) "I strangled that bitch, and I could kill you too." That's powerful stuff if you believe him. The biggest problem for Breakfield, in his testimony, is the eight-year gap between the time he says it happened and the time he tells the authorities.

DEFENSE (MALE)

This happened back in 2002?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

Yes.

DEFENSE (MALE)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

If he made that statement to you, weren't you curious enough to start talking to people about who it was he would have killed?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

No, sir.

DEFENSE (MALE)

You didn't care who he killed?

DAVID BREAKFIELD (WITNESS)

I just tried to stay as far away from the situation as I could.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

In hindsight, I don't know that you could really say the prosecution had a case. We don't know that Leah broke up with him. It really feels like a leap without any physical evidence to just be like, well, she's gone, so Nick must have done it. They just guessed. It wasn't a case. It was just a theory.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I mean, during trial, I mean, I don't even know how I stayed composed when people were lying about me the way they were. You're, I mean, you're helpless. At the time, I mean, I put my, I put my life in my attorney's hands.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

There was no DNA evidence tying him to Leah. There was no evidence in his car. There was just nothing physically to show that he, in fact, did this, and there wasn't any reason for him to do it.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

The great filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock had a technique that he called the McGuffin.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

Hitchcock explained what a McGuffin is on "The Dick Cavett Show."

DICK CAVETT ("THE DICK CAVETT SHOW")

Can you explain what a McGuffin is?

ALFRED HITCHCOCK (FILMMAKER)

Yes. It's always called the thing that the characters on the screen worry about.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

The characters in a movie would chase all over after this certain object, when it really didn't have any meaning at all. So, in the movie "Casablanca," it was the transit papers. In "Pulp Fiction," it was the suitcase.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN
SAMUEL L JACKSON ("PULP FICTION")

We happy?

JOHN TRAVOLTA ("PULP FICTION")

Yeah, we happy.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

And really, members of the jury, that's what we've got here is we've got an McGuffin, and it's Nick McGuffin.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

After nine days of intense and emotional testimony, both sides rest their case. Now Nick McGuffin's fate lies in the hands of the jury.

JUDGE (MALE)

Has the jury reach a verdict?

JUROR (FEMALE)

Yes.

JUDGE (MALE)

Okay.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I actually felt optimistic. I really did. I mean, I had bailiffs, I mean, and there was even a sergeant at the Coos County Jail while I was waiting and they all said, you're going home today.

JUDGE (MALE)

As to count one, murder, we find the defendant...

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) This ends up being a stunning verdict that could only happen in two states in America, Oregon being one of them.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

GRAPHICS: 2011 JULY 19

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I knew it was a close case. I knew it could go either way.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

The defense team is always anxious. We felt there was reasonable doubt. We were very hopeful.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I was nervous. I was worried. Yeah, it was a scary moment.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

The mood was so unfriendly. It was just a very tense, tense courtroom.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I remember looking down. In my mind, I probably was asking God for help. I was praying for the right answer.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

So the jury comes out from deliberations. They hand the judge the form.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

And when they read the verdict...

JUDGE (MALE)

As to count one, murder, we find the defendant not guilty.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

When we heard, "not guilty of the charge of murder," we were ecstatic.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I remember kind of, you know, kind of nodding my head, like, thank you.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Nick's reaction to the not guilty. It was palpable. There's just the relief.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

And then the hope that the next verdict was also going to be "not guilty."

JUDGE (MALE)

As to the lesser included offense of manslaughter in the first degree, we find the defendant guilty.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I think I nearly jumped out of my seat. I mean, it was almost like a lightning bolt had hit me.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

He gasped. He jumped. The, the look on his face was utter disbelief. It just was disbelief.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The second verdict was, I mean, it was shock. I don't even remember anything that was said after that.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

The manslaughter verdict was devastating, because despite all of our best efforts, we had failed and we had failed an innocent man.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

It was hard to believe the verdict. There was no evidence against Nick. They just attacked his character.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I broke down. I remember looking back at my mom, my dad. I remember looking at my daughter's mom. I mean, we all, we started crying and...

JUDGE (MALE)

No reaction by anybody at all no matter what this verdict is. And I will enforce that rule.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

One of the things that the court instructs everyone in the courtroom is not to show a response to the verdict, whatever it is.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

His daughter's mother was sitting between me and my husband. She was crying. I was doing exactly this, shaking my head.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

Ma'am, you and you need to leave. Now.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

I got kicked out of the courtroom.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

I was devastated for him. I was devastated for his family. No part of me felt like they got justice.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I think the verdict was a just verdict. I think it was a right verdict.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

I was not shocked. I was confident in this investigation. I was confident the jury made the right decision, and I'm confident as I sit here and talk to you today.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Typically, prosecutors uncertain about whether they can get a murder conviction will charge on a lesser count like manslaughter.

WINSTON ROSS (FORMER REPORTER "THE REGISTER-GUARD")

The thing that's risky about it is that if you charge somebody with first-degree murder and with manslaughter, you sort of know that you're giving the jury an opportunity to pick one.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) In this case, there's even more incentive for the prosecutor to request a manslaughter charge.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

And it's because Oregon has this quirky law.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

Because for murder you need a unanimous verdict. And in Oregon, for manslaughter, you can have two holdouts.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

We found out that it was ten in favor of guilt and two in favor of acquittal.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) If this happened in any other state today with two jurors unwilling to convict, it would end up in a hung jury.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I mean, if you have two people saying not guilty, that's reasonable doubt.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Nick was sentenced to ten years.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I don't think you can prepare for prison. You have to put on an image in there, and you have to put on a hard exterior, and you act a certain way and you live a certain way in there. You find some type of routine. If you don't find a routine, you're gonna be lost.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

Every holiday, I tried to go his birthday. Definitely tried to visit him on those occasions. Every year was hard because my granddaughter, okay, how many more birthdays without my dad? How many more Christmases without my dad?"

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

I remember my daughter had brought a key, and all she was trying to do was to unlock every door she could to where she could touch me, to where she could take me home.

SHERRY HIXSON (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FMR. TEACHER)

These are letters that Nick has written to me down through the years. I had written to him, telling him the things that I remembered about him. I had not seen him since he was 10 years old and in my class. He says, "I'm still that same kid inside that you taught back in school."

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

Nick wrote a couple letters while he was in there, thanking me for being the true friend, standing by him, never wavering.

NANETTE STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

Every two to three months, I'd get a letter from him and vice versa. There were three consistent messages. Number one was his love for his daughter. His appreciation for people that believe in him, and his desire to find out who did this.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

He never gave up wanting to find out what really happened. That was his mission while he was in prison.

NANETTE STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

He was cautious in letters. He wouldn't always go into the, a lot of the details about the case, other than that he was really working on it.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

What we don't see coming is this guardian angel.

RICK STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

He was very optimistic that they were on to something.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Everything about the way that the prosecution said this murder happened didn't make sense.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Janis came in and found a piece of evidence that had been if not overlooked, dismissed as insignificant.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) A paint chip from Leah's shirt could potentially solve the case.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

GRAPHICS: 2011

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

JUDGE (MALE)

Has the jury reached a verdict, then? As to manslaughter in the first degree, we find the defendant guilty.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I thought that I'd be found not guilty. There's just so many unknowns.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

I kept telling Nick, once we get to trial, the truth will come out. And it didn't.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It is frustrating. Like you're in a locked, padded room and you can't get out, and you're screaming. Nobody can hear you. Nobody wants to hear you.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

After the trial, I immediately wrote up, like, a 25-page packet of information. There are several other organizations that deal with wrongful convictions. Wrote to every one of them. I wrote to all the congressmen, wrote to the President. That was probably 2015, and that's when the Oregon Innocence Project finally took his case.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

The case was handed to Janis, who would become Nick's number one advocate.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

I had a really strong sense that Nick was innocent, because of the evidence that I was looking at. It didn't make sense to me, and that's why I initially got involved.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I remember when I first met Janis, telling her I just want you guys to find out what happened. I want you guys to believe in me.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

We've got multiple witnesses seeing him at the Fast Mart.

NOELLE CROMBIE (REPORTER FOR "THE OREGONIAN")

Janis launched this project in large part because of her own personal experience with the justice system and her brother's experience.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Originally, I was working in commercial litigation. I didn't find commercial litigation personally fulfilling. I came to this this wrongful conviction type work because my older brother Jason was wrongfully convicted in Nicaragua. Anderson Cooper covered Jason's case.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

ANDERSON COOPER (CNN NEWS)

Puracal is a young American charged with drug trafficking, convicted and sent to Nicaragua's notorious La Modelo prison.

JASON PURACAL (JANIS PURACAL'S BROTHER)

During trial, they never presented any evidence that were linked to the charges against me. I was thinking that it's just a case of mistaken identity, and once they figure out who I am, they'll let me go.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

I thought that it was gonna be as simple as having a conversation with the prosecutor in Nicaragua and then I would take my brother home. And I had no idea that it would turn into a two-year nightmare.

JASON PURACAL (JANIS PURACAL'S BROTHER)

I have faith that the judicial system in Nicaragua will let me go free.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

I remember talking to my husband...

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Oh, yeah, I gotta send (inaudible).

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

...after Jason was exonerated, and telling him, I wanna do this for complete strangers. And he said, then let's do it.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

She's been instrumental, wonderful in investigating, getting through and finding the true facts of this case.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I mean, she knows things about my case that I don't even know about, finding every little nook and cranny.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

There are so many things about this case that raise red flags. There's no blood, no hairs, no fibers, no DNA connecting this crime to Nick.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) No matter how you view this case, this is definitely not an open-and-shut case.

GRAPHICS: THE PAINT CHIP

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

In 2000, when police found Leah's body, they found this little gray paint chip on Leah's tank top. We know that the paint chip either came from automotive paint or from maintenance paint.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

It doesn't match Nick's blue Mustang. It doesn't match Nick's parents' maroon T-bird.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

And it did not come from Kristen Steinhoff's vehicle.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

The rumor was that two people were in a car that hit Leah and killed her.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

But they didn't test it on any of the other vehicles that might have been involved.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

We eliminated the other individuals as potential suspects in the case. I don't know where that chip came from, and there's no evidence to suggest that it has anything to do with the case.

GRAPHICS: THE SHOE

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Police told "20/20" in 2010 that the shoe that the blood on it was found right in town on North Elm Street.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Her shoe was found by the road here with blood on it.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) That night?

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

That night.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

And that's how their theory gets started. Because it played into this idea that Nick got angry in that spot, and that's where the murder happened. That shoe that was found on North Elm Street had no blood on it. And instead, there was a shoe that was found ten miles away out in the woods that had blood stains on it.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

I might be wrong on that, but I don't remember. I'm not saying where the shoe was found, blood's not important. I'm not saying that at all. What's important there is there is Leah's blood on a shoe and it was her shoe.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

GRAPHICS: THE TIMELINE

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Coquille is this small triangular loop. There were over 20 witnesses who saw Nick driving around that night, looking for Leah. He doesn't have time to commit this crime when you actually look at this.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The night that Leah went missing, I didn't see her after 7:00 p.m. when I dropped her off at Cherie's.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

Well, we had one eyewitness that put him and her together near the Mitchell place around 9:00.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

We know that that can't be true because we have documentation of another witness, Nick Backman, right here at the number seven location, who sees Leah walk by the ATM, and the police officers go out to that ATM and pull those records and confirm that that is 9:04 pm.

GRAPHICS: THE MUSTANG

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The accusations that my Mustang was cleaned out were false.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

The police and the prosecution specifically said and told the jury that Nick wiped down the vinyl.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

One of the things that Kathy Wilcox testified to was it appeared the seats had been wiped.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

But you can see the vinyl seats. You can see the trash on the seats. You can see that nothing's been cleaned in this car. If there was a body in there, we would expect to find blood, wads of hair, something, fibers. They didn't find anything to tie this car to Leah.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

I wasn't here when this car was seized or searched. What I was told was when this car was taken three weeks later that the trunk had been sterilized.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Chief Daniels had access to all of the documentation about the actual evidence in this case. I don't know why he wasn't relying on it. They created an entire theory to convict a man based on evidence that's just wrong.

NOELLE CROMBIE (REPORTER FOR "THE OREGONIAN")

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

Janis looked at a number of issues, but at the end of the day, most of them weren't going to be enough to set aside his conviction.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) This is almost straight out of a movie. It turns out a piece of evidence that was there from, from the beginning could now lead to McGuffin's freedom.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

They found DNA evidence that finally shows what I've been saying for nearly 20 years.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) McGuffin's new attorney definitely finds some red flags, new evidence, but the standard is still very high to get a new trial.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

In this type of work for wrongful convictions, you're always looking for what's the evidence that can prove that my client is actually innocent? And the odds of finding it are slim to none.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) But if you've got something like DNA evidence, suddenly you've got a real argument to make.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

When we got into this case in post-conviction in 2015, we started to look at the original DNA testing from 2000. The state police crime lab were able to pull DNA evidence off of her shoes.

CHRYSTAL BELL (FORENSIC SERVICES DIV. DIR. FOR OREGON STATE POLICE)

Back in 2000, the crime lab reported that Leah Freeman's DNA was found on her shoes, as well as some male DNA that belonged to one of the deputies who collected the evidence.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

We were surprised when we looked at the raw data from the original DNA testing back in 2000. We were shocked to find out that there was actually DNA from an unidentified male found on both of Leah's shoes, her right shoe and her left shoe. That was a huge moment for our case.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

They found DNA evidence that finally shows what I've been saying for nearly 20 years. I mean, you're ecstatic that, that it's happening, and hopefully the right outcome will eventually take place.

CHRYSTAL BELL (FORENSIC SERVICES DIV. DIR. FOR OREGON STATE POLICE)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

Back in 2000, that was the infancy of our DNA testing. But the analyst at the time chose not to actually cull out that potential male DNA because she couldn't decide what it was, because it was at a very, very low level.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) The issue is that in 2010 when the trial occurs, they've got much more advanced DNA technology and different protocols that would have required them to turn over something like this.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

I was disappointed. If the Oregon State crime lab would have said, chief, this is what you have, I would assigned that out to the investigative team to look, let's find out who that is.

NOELLE CROMBIE (REPORTER FOR "THE OREGONIAN")

The district attorney and the defense relied on statements by the Oregon State Police crime lab at the time, and those statements did not reveal this, the presence of this trace DNA.

SHAUN MCCREA (NICK'S FORMER ATTORNEY)

I was surprised because I have always relied on the crime lab to provide full information to all parties in a case. I knew there was something missing, and we could never get at it.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

I was, you know, I was kinda angry. I'm going, whoa, what happened here? Do I think I got intentionally set up by these guys, or was it extreme incompetence that led to this? No, I don't think so. I think it was the scientists made a decision based on the policies and procedures at that time.

CHRYSTAL BELL (FORENSIC SERVICES DIV. DIR. FOR OREGON STATE POLICE)

Had they asked us to reexamine that evidence, we would have done so. We don't always have an automatic trigger to go back and do reexamination every time we get additional evidence.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

If the jury in 2011 knew that there was DNA of an unidentified male on the victim's bloodstained shoe, the jury would have acquitted. There is no doubt in my mind.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) McGuffin's new attorney made the argument that under the law, they were required to turn over this evidence from the lab, and they didn't and that that failure should lead at least to a new trial.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

The post-conviction trial is different than a regular trial. It's just before a judge. And it went for weeks and weeks and weeks.

GRAPHICS: 2019 NOVEMBER 29

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

NEWS REPORTER (FEMALE)

A major reversal tonight in the murder case of Leah Freeman, the Coquille teenager who was found dead in the woods after she disappeared nearly two decades ago.

NEWS REPORTER (MALE)

The conviction of Nick McGuffin, who was Leah's high school sweetheart at the time, has been overturned.

GRAPHICS: JUDGE OVERTURNS CONVICTION

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

The post-conviction court issued the ruling to overturn Nick's conviction on a Friday, right after Thanksgiving. And I was with my family and got the news by email. Everybody was so excited. This was the moment we had been waiting five years for when we got this ruling.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

That was a great day. I get on the phone, and Janis is like, hey. I'm like, hi. And so, well, we won. And, and I said, that's the best news I've had in nine years. And yeah, it was amazing. From then on, it was just kind of a waiting game when I was gonna get out.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) Just because the judge throws out the conviction does not mean that Nick McGuffin is gonna be a free man.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

So now it comes back to me. I have to make a decision.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

(Off-camera) The question now for prosecutors is, are they gonna retry Nick McGuffin, or does he walk away a free man?

COMMERCIAL BREAK

NEWS REPORTER (FEMALE)

New evidence has come to light...

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The DNA didn't match me. If the DNA would've matched me, it would've came out. But when we found out about it, I mean, I wanted to tell everybody, I'm coming home.

GRAPHICS: TOP STORY

NEWS REPORTER (FEMALE)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

It's our top story in Oregon. The judge ruled that...

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

And then, from then on it was just kind of a waiting game of when I was gonna get out.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

We waited and waited and waited.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

But Judge Sullivan sends that case right back to the DA's office to make a decision. New trial or not?

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

So now it comes back to me. I have to make a decision. Do I try this case again? I met with the investigative team, got Mark Daniels on the phone.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

Well, you look at this, Nick's already served 90-some percent of his sentence. So we go back, put this altogether, retry it. You put the family back through this again, for what?

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

But then, I sat down with Cory Courtright and she just flat told me, "I cannot take the strain of another trial." And she asked me not to try the case again. I also took into account it was a 10-2 verdict. We didn't convince everybody. Throw in this unknown male DNA, and it's not Mr. McGuffin's, so there was that issue. We talked it through and we made the decision of no, don't go forward, and so I dismissed the case.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Janis called me and she said, "How, how would you like to go home?" And I said, "Yeah, I, I wanna go home. I'm ready to go home." And she said, "Well, it's happening."

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

It was December 17th and it was about 2:30. Nick calls me and he says, "I'm getting released tonight. Can you be here at 7:00?" I go, "sure."

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

And then my mom, she kind of did a little, I mean, they call it like a mic drop moment, at work. She's like, "I'm, I'm out of here. I'm getting my son."

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

It was unbelievable that it had finally, finally happened.

GRAPHICS: 2019 DECEMBER 17

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

It was overwhelming to be waiting to be released knowing that that's the last time I was ever gonna have to be in a place like that.

NEWS REPORTER (FEMALE)

An Oregon man who spent nearly a decade behind bars walked out of prison tonight, finally free after a judge overturned his contradiction.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

When we drove up to the prison, all the media's at the gate. The place is hopping. And there's Nick with all his wonderful people from the Forensic Justice Project.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Whoo! Whoo!

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

I think that was the first time I had cried in a long time and had tears in my eyes. It was wonderful seeing him knowing he was free. It was beautiful.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

When you do this wrongful conviction work, you live for the moment you get to walk an innocent client out of prison. And we got that moment with Nick, after 20 years of fighting to prove his innocence.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

I hugged Nick and I hugged Janis. I hugged everybody. And then we immediately drove over to his daughter's house, and we wanted to surprise her too.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Her mother couldn't keep the secret. We were all excited and so, you know, my daughter already knew. But it's a ten-year jump forward. You missed everything, but I mean, she's got her dad home.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

I, I broke into tears. I was just so happy, so happy for him.

NANETTE STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

We were thrilled, just so excited for him.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It was good to see them all again, to know that they supported me through all of this.

RICK STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

It was great to see him, and so we sat down and, and by the way, that's when he said that he still owed us a dinner from ten years ago.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN
NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I, I do. I...

NANETTE STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

We don't want him to forget that.

RICK STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

No.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Yeah, so I told them, yeah, I'll, I'll come back and cook them dinner. I did choose to go back to Coquille. I mean, my family's there. That's my home. I mean, the house that my parents still live in is the same house that they lived in when, when Leah was around.

HALEY GREENWAY (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

Being in Coquille still, that's, that has to be really tough on him because, again, there's still a lot of people who believe one way, and it's not, you know, believing that he's innocent.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

It's hard. I mean, even now, I mean, I know all those things. I know all those things to be true. I wish people would look at that.

NANETTE STEVENS (NICK MCGUFFIN'S FRIEND)

And he has been applying for jobs and is having a struggle finding one. He wants to get back into the kitchen and do his cooking.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

After my exoneration, trying to get my life back, I had an idea of what it was gonna be like, and I, I was wrong. It's not, it's not easy. It's actually really hard. I have, I mean, I have anxiety. I don't like going in public places. I changed in prison. I'm broken. But I mean, I mean, mentally, I'm broken. You know, now I look at her, the strength that she has at her age, I think that helps me.

LORI TOBIAS (FORMER REPORTER "THE OREGONIAN")

Cory still believes Nick is guilty. I can imagine that Coquille is as divided in this as they were from the start.

MARK DANIELS (FMR. CITY OF COQUILLE POLICE CHIEF)

They didn't say Nick was innocent. They didn't say that he didn't kill Leah Freeman.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

I still stand behind the investigation of this case. There's evidence in this record to find this defendant guilty.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

It's irresponsible that the police and the prosecutor continue to say that Nick is guilty and spread that misinformation. And they're so busy trying to avoid blame, that they have forgotten that they destroyed a man's life. He was in prison for nine years for something that he didn't do. And in the process of that, they've forgotten, too, that they've allowed Leah's real killer to go free. There's DNA evidence that belongs to someone else.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

So, then the question is, who does this belong to and what does it mean?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Let's go find out what happened. Let's solve this case once and for all.

QUINN MEYERS (NICK'S FRIEND)

He never gave up wanting to find out what really happened. That was his mission while he was in prison.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

That DNA we know doesn't belong to Nick, but the question still plagues him. Who does it belong to?

COMMERCIAL BREAK

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Why can't we track this DNA down? Why can't we investigate it right this time? You have a chance right now to clean the slate, to make it right. I'm pretty sure a lot of people would want that. I know Leah would. I know her family wants that. I want the truth for them.

JANIS PURACAL (FORENSIC JUSTICE PROJECT)

Nick has always told me that my primary job was to solve this case. He didn't care if he ever got out as long as I would solve it for Leah.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

My understanding now is, yes, definitively, there is a male profile on that shoe, but there are not enough markers to put it into the database to see if we can identify somebody that way.

CHRYSTAL BELL (FORENSIC SERVICES DIV. DIR. FOR OREGON STATE POLICE)

It is not suitable to put into the FBI's database for forensic samples and convicted offenders. The quality of the DNA was not good enough in 2000. It was not good enough in 2010, and it is still not good enough.

DAN ABRAMS (ABC NEWS)

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

(Off-camera) The Oregon crime lab is insistent, explaining that the sample in question, when compared to another DNA sample, can only exclude a match.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

Remember that theory about a car accident involving two suspects? The DA says that very kind of DNA comparison was made with them.

PAUL FRASIER (COOS COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY)

That's what we did with the potential suspects in the case, and they all came back at not being the donor of that DNA.

PAT LALAMA (CRIME JOURNALIST)

So here's the question, if the police department is not reopening the investigation, how will they ever get a new suspect?

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Investigative work needs to be pushed on it. The person or persons that did this, they deserve to be held accountable for what they did. I believe it was about a year after Leah went missing that my father and I decided to do something in commemoration for Leah.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

Bruce, my husband, and Nick decided to put in a huge pond in the backyard. It was a good healer for Nick.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

Leah loved pink, and the rhododendron is back there.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

The way it's blooming at this time of year, I find it quite amazing because I I don't think Rhodies are blooming like that at the beginning of February. Kind of my idea of maybe Leah letting me know she's still here.

KATHY MCGUFFIN (NICK'S MOTHER)

We dedicated it to Leah, and I would see him go out in the backyard and stand there and just look in the pond.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

I honor Leah's memory by never forgetting about her.

NICK MCGUFFIN (FMR. BOYFRIEND OF LEAH FREEMAN)

This is the last photo that I got to take her. I know that she was happy at that moment. She was a ball of light. None of it's for me. It's for Leah.

LAST SEEN WALKING; STORY OF NICK MCGUFFIN AND THE MURDER OF LEAH FREEMAN

AMY ROBACH (ABC NEWS)

Nick was released but only after serving nine years of that ten-year sentence.

DAVID MUIR (ABC NEWS)

And we should point out, Amy, that any day now the Supreme Court is set to decide whether or not it's constitutional for a jury with a non-unanimous verdict to still find a person guilty.

AMY ROBACH (ABC NEWS)

And remember, it was because of that law in Oregon that allowed a jury to find Nick guilty of manslaughter.

DAVID MUIR (ABC NEWS)

In the meantime, that is "20/20" for tonight. I'm David Muir.

AMY ROBACH (ABC NEWS)

And I'm Amy Robach. For all of us here at ABC News and "20/20," good night.

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